Conventional Wisdom and American Security in a Changing World

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For the past thirty years or so conventional wisdom has it that the world is shrinking. Complex technological advancements in transportation and computers -- the argument goes -- has shrunk our globe by allowing quantum improvements in the speedy transfer of goods, services and information. Using such transfers as a yardstick, there is no question that the conventional wisdom is wise indeed. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall a new, two-headed conventional truism has joined the "shrinking world" wisdom. This new wisdom revolves around the discreditation of Communist ideology (plus the concomitant rise of Western democratic liberalism), and the related, but distinct, growth of a truly world economy. The upshot of these popular perceptions by the intellectual avant-garde is a recent avalanche of learned writings describing the inter-dependent, multi-polar nature of this new world order. As with most conventional wisdom -- even those of the intelligentsia -- these perceptions are right on the mark. Not only is the globe shrinking, but as it breaks loose from its Cold War shackles, our global village finds itself economically bound together as never before. On the political stage, however, we face a troubled, divisive world where regional instabilities threaten to bring forth the type of military holocausts which over 40 years of superpower juggling had managed to avoid.

Unfortunately, conventional wisdom is the junk food of intellectual diet. It is knowledge that goes down easy but fails

to provide the deeper nourishment necessary for broader understanding of the larger issues. This essay briefly examines the ramifications of the conventional wisdom just discussed and how best to protect American physical security in the post-Cold War period. It argues the case for a significant change in the way we view our military security. Specifically, with a changing multi-polar, inter-dependent world serving as an ominous backdrop, the conventional, symmetrical, tit-for-tat vantage point of American physical security needs to be significantly enlarged.

Before describing the current period of transition we find ourselves in, it is first necessary to take a look back. If in 1990 the world community finds itself awash in a tidal wave of liberal democratic ideology, it is largely because for over four decades that goal has been a central tenet of American foreign policy. As early as February 1946, growing disillusionment with Stalinist policy and the real threat of Soviet expansionism at the expense of Western democratic ideals prompted George Kennan to pen his famous "Mr. X" article. In it, Kennan recommended a policy of containment, "to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation...to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power." The subsequent adoption of the containment philosophy and Truman's support to Greece and Turkey in their resistance to Soviet-supported guerilla units

marked a historic debut for the United States.

In 1950, shortly after the Korean War had begun, NSC-68 acknowledged the importance of US military power in our containment policy. American post-war involvement in a parade of worldwide collective security arrangements -- NATO being the best-known and most successful -- reflected US willingness to back its desire to, in Kennan's words, "gradually mellow" Soviet power. Although containment came to be viewed by many as an end into itself, it is clear that it was meant as a means to protect Western ideals from Soviet intimidation.

In the end, of course, the containment policy was a great success. When American decision makers failed to properly distinguish between legitimate nationalistic aspirations and Soviet-controlled puppet governments, mistakes were made. Vietnam was the most tragic example. Nevertheless, there is no question that the reason the Cold War is waning and Communist ideology is, in Reagan's words, headed for "the dustbin of history" is largely because of the commitment of the United States and its willingness to back up its policy goals with military force.

The time of transition we now face is particularly troublesome. Not only must we develop new means to promote our Western ideals, we must do so in a rapidly changing world. Paul Nitze argues, in the current issue of Foreign Affairs, the need

for an American strategic concept which will:

-- accommodate and protect diversity within a general framework of world order;

-- support supranational organizations (i.e., UN, NATO, EC, etc) to provide regional stability and forward movement of important global issues, and;

-- allow the United States to play the role of "honest broker" on the world stage.

I concur with Mr. Nitze's overall policy goals in large measure because they underscore the broader understanding of the inter-connected relationship between US security policy and the larger conventional wisdom discussed earlier.

For example, Kenneth Keller, in his essay in Sea-Changes: American Foreign Policy in a World Transformed, establishes a solid framework for the international impact of science and technology (S&T). Tracking S&T trends in such areas as biosciences, materials science, information technologies, and scientific research mega-projects (i.e., the superconducting super collider), Keller reaches significant conclusions which affect traditional concepts of security policy. He argues that S&T has put increasing limitations on the exercise of national sovereignty by severely curtailing the power of governments to dictate the flow of information. This information flow, having little respect for national boundaries has resulted in a tremendous degree of uncertainty in many S&T areas directly affecting national security. One needs to look no further than the uncertain and highly volatile state of nuclear weapon

technology development in the Middle East and other Third World areas to underscore the validity of this observation.

Another S&T trend that clearly impacts national security is the increasing number of environmental problems brought about from growing populations and intensified technology. Issues such as global warming, acid rain, and deforestation cannot be solved by any one nation alone. Yet, failure to solve such issues potentially threatens, at the very least, general world order.

It is no accident that popular demonstrations from Tianamen Square to Tehran to Moscow feature protestors with English language signs. The availability of global information networks tend to support democratic structures. At the same time, however, S&T trends diminish national control of what heretofore were largely domestic concerns. The flip side of the "shrinking world" coin, therefore, is a loss of national control. The end result is the growing impact of S&T on American foreign policy.

The continuing economic rise of Japan and the imminent economic integration of the European Community (EC) underscores the changed world economy. Peter Drucker, writing in Foreign Affairs, highlights three fundamental and permanent changes in the world's economic picture:

-- The primary products economy has come "uncoupled" from the industrial economy.

-- In the industrial economy, production has come

"uncoupled" from employment.

-- Capital movements in both goods and services have become, like trade, the driving force of the world economy.

The details surrounding these changes are complex and, to some extent, debatable. Nevertheless, the conclusion by almost all observers is the same: economic dynamics have shifted from the national economy to the world economy. what this means is that any large business -- just like any country -- that wants to prosper economically will succeed only to the extent that is competitive in the world market.

A corollary to this conclusion is that in a truly world marketplace any country that is not economically competitive will have difficulty maintaining a strong position in other areas of national interest. The Soviet Union is frequently cited as a first-rate military with a third-rate everything else. This is a valid observation only at a superficial level. The larger issue is whether it is possible for a country to be militarily secure if its economic and political situation is in disarray. In the final analysis, any country that is fundamentally unsound economically has serious long-term military security problems regardless of the current correlation of forces.

This is not to suggest that standing military forces are unimportant. The United States clearly must be prepared to counter potential military moves against its international interests. Rather, it is to underscore the reality that current military hardware is the least important aspect of <u>long-term</u> security policy.

As an aside, Paul Kennedy's massive study, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, argues that "imperial overreach" has led to the decline of every great power in history. His argument, reduced to its bare essentials, is that the United States has overextended itself both militarily and economically. Consequently, America must now follow in the paths of 16th Century Spain and 19th Century Britain and decline as the dominant world player of the 20th Century. It is an argument that represents the merger of conventional wisdom and cocktail party pessimism. Fortunately, it is an argument that is fundamentally flawed.

Joseph Nye, in his new book Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power, makes a convincing argument that throughout the centuries the true measures of national power have been misunderstood. He defines today's sources of power as "hard" or "soft," and divides them into seven indices: basic resources, military, economic, S&T, national cohesion, universal culture and international institutions. The United States, he concludes, is strong in all categories. Consequently, the US will remain a leading power in a changing world. Albeit, a world less dominated by the superpowers than during the Cold War.

In the end, America's physical security is best secured by a broader understanding of the concept of security policy. To be sure, collective security arrangements, regional balances of power and various hemispheric defense doctrines will all play a

combined roll in defining a traditional security policy. Yet, physical security can properly be viewed only as part of a larger mosaic. Clearly, economic problems such as our trade imbalance and deficit spending must be corrected for us to remain secure. Similarly, until fundamental disputes in the religious/ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are addressed, America's security will remain in jeopardy. Lastly, global environmental dangers represent true threats to our security.

America in the post-World War II period spent enormous energy in the process of rebuilding Western Europe and Japan. Today, that same type of world leadership is needed in easing international tensions and using world organizations such as the United Nations to forge consensus -- by force if necessary -- in multi-lateral efforts. The challenge is in maintaining the will to lead.